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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0375
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RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0241
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0302
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SUBJECT: RURAL WEST BENGAL AGAIN ERUPTS INTO VIOLENCE OVER LAND ACQUISITION

REF: A) CALCUTTA 0011 B) CALCUTTA 0017

¶1. (U) March 14, violence erupted again in the rural West Bengal district of Nandigram, located approximately 150 km southwest of Kolkata, when police fired on villagers protesting the state government's plans to acquire land for industrial development. At least five persons reportedly were killed and several other villagers injured. The clash was prompted when police and security forces tried to enter district villages in the morning to reestablish government access and control. Roads had been blockaded and police access prevented by local protestors since January, when violence was first sparked following reports that land would be acquired for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) (Ref. A). The January clashes resulted in at least six deaths, and numerous injuries. A recently formed village group, Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh - BUP (Land Acquisition Resistance Committee), organized the agitation against the police which soon became violent. A Post contact, who spoke with the BUP Chief in Nandigram, Abdus Samat, said that Samat claimed that at least 12 persons were killed in the violence, of which five were Muslims. West Bengal opposition Trinamul Congress Party has called for a 12-hour bandh (general strike) on Friday, March 16 and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has called for a 24-hour bandh for the same day.

¶2. (SBU) Superintendent of Police G. A. Srinivas, who was supervising the operation, told media that the police had to open fire after teargas shells failed to control the situation. He did not provide a specific number of deaths but said that "a number of people including some policemen must have been killed in the clashes." State Home Secretary P. R. Roy confirmed that there was a clash between security personnel and protestors, telling reporters that eight to ten people were injured. Inspector General of Police (Law and Order) Raj Kanojia also offered no casualty figures but said that police had to resort to shooting after teargas and lathicharge (use of sticks to beat protestors) failed to disperse the crowd.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: The Government of West Bengal continues to face serious agitation against its efforts to develop industry in rural areas. Villagers are afraid that if their land is taken, they will not be properly compensated and lose their livelihoods. The latest round of violence will only serve to exacerbate an already sensitive situation. Also, the possible death of Muslim villagers adds another potentially disturbing sectarian element to the issue. Muslim groups such as the

Jamiat-e-Ulema Hind have sought to portray the land acquisition efforts as implicitly anti-Muslim and are using the violence to politicize the normally quiescent Muslim community, which constitutes approximately 26 percent of West Bengal's population.

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